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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 2001, the University of Alaska Fairbanks School of Education included a web-based instructional component in all distance education classes. This component aims to mediate access and equity issues in providing postsecondary education to rural Alaska residents. The number of courses offered through distance education had been limited by the time constraints involved in audio-conferencing, which had been the main means of delivering coursework. Students taking courses by distance delivery, including many Alaska Natives, were taking up to 15 years to complete their college degree. Geographic isolation also made it difficult for already licensed teachers to take additional coursework, either for professional development or to climb the salary scale. Almost immediately following the decision, some members of the rural faculty showed resistance to learning the web-based system. The heightened nature and tone of the resistance suggested fear in using the system, fear of technology in general, and fear of change. In the fall of 2001, a team flew to the rural campuses to provide technology training workshops. Observations made during the campus visits indicated that well-equipped computer labs at some sites were under-utilized; technical support staff was available at each site; and under-attendance at many workshops implicated faculty indifference to learning the web-based system. It was concluded that reluctant faculty must be accorded every possible support measure to assist them in learning to utilize new technologies. (TD)

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Reaching Out to the Teachers of Teachers: Distance Education in Rural Alaska

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Reaching Out to the Teachers of Teachers: Distance Education in Rural Alaska

ABSTRACT

This ethnography will describe the experiences of the researcher of a university team as they visited the rural campuses in Bethel, Nome, Kotsubue, and Dillingham, which are part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks School of Education service area. The objective of the trips was to provide instructional technology training to faculty, staff, and students. The event that led to these visits was the School of Education faculty's historic decision in spring of 2001, to include a web-based instructional component in all the classes offered by distance education. The faculty sought to mediate the access and equity issues of providing a post-secondary education to residents of rural Alaska.

Only so many courses could be offered each semester by the university through distance education due to time constraints involved in audio conferencing, which until very recently had been the main means of delivering the course work. Students taking courses by distance delivery, including many Alaska Natives, were taking up to fifteen years to complete their college degree. The geographic isolation of the villages also made it difficult for already licensed teachers to take additional course work for either professional development or to climb a school district's salary scale. Course work was rarely offered at the graduate level as the School of Education faculty sought first to meet the critical need to license teachers for rural schools. Unfortunately, some members of the rural faculty resisted learning to use the university's web based instructional system.

Introduction: The Context

This paper will discuss an ethnography conducted by a university researcher who as member of a team planned technology workshops to faculty, staff and students in the rural campuses in Bethel, Nome, Tok, Kotsubue, and Dillingham. These campuses are located in the University of Alaska Fairbanks [UAF] School of Education service area and serve as hubs for students from the smaller surrounding villages. The primary purpose of these visits was to provide training in web-based instruction.

Alaska as the largest state in the union is two and a half times the size of Texas and 1/5 the size of the entire country. During the long winters, the most isolated villages are accessible only by plane, dog sled, or snow machine. The geography of the state, the lack of a viable road system, the significantly higher prices for food and housing in the rural areas, and the harsh winters have contributed to the state's inability to train, to hire, and to keep enough teachers for schools in bush Alaska. The state has had a teacher shortage in these areas for decades, and the majority of new teachers hired come from out of state. Some school districts seem to have a permanent revolving door for new hires for teachers and for administrators.

The geographic isolation in the Alaskan villages also has made it difficult for already licensed teachers to obtain additional courses for professional development purposes, limiting their growth as teachers and their ability to move up on a salary scale. Prior to 2001, course work was rarely offered at the graduate level as the School of Education faculty prioritized the critical need to license teachers for the hard to place rural areas.

Only so many courses could be offered each semester by the UAF Center for Distance Education due to the time constraints involved in audio conferencing, the major mode of delivery of distance education courses in the state (Reyes & Bradley, 2000). Because of this, some students, many of the them Alaska Natives, were taking up to ten to fifteen years to complete their college degree and/or to meet the ever-changing state requirements for a teaching license. (See Reyes, 2001, for further discussion.)

FALL 2000 HEADCOUNT BY CAMPUS AND ETHNICITY

Rural Campuses, UAF

	Bristol Bay	Chukchi	Fairbanks*	Interior/ Aleutia	Kuskokwim	Northwest
Asian	4	2	227	6	3	3
Afr/Amer	3	2	143	0	0	3
Latino	3	5	128	7	5	7
AK Nat/Ind	274	98	505	239	233	218
Other	34	15	309	25	25	25
White	213	94	3626	399	69	267

* Main Campus

UAF Office of Institutional Research

While taking college course work by distance delivery, many Alaska Native education students got jobs as "teacher aides" in the village schools. Taking a decade or more to earn a teaching license, some of the Alaska Native distance education students were in fact the instructional leaders in their village schools sometimes working to train the new, inexperienced, mostly white, out-of state, licensed teachers who came and went. In some elementary schools, the "licensed" teachers got to fill out report cards and district reports while the Alaska Native aides took care of the classroom instruction, the classroom discipline, and any communication with parents.

UAF School of Education

> To be a model that demonstrates how gender, racial, and cultural diversity can strengthen a university and society.
> Be an educational center for Alaska Natives
> From the UAF Strategic Plan

The mission statement of the UAF School of Education is unique for its stated commitment to rural Alaska, to Alaska Natives, to culture, and to diversity. Historically, the UAF School of Education faculty has made an effort to recruit Alaska Native students to their licensure programs, especially at the elementary levels. Most of the state's educators agree that educating and licensing Alaska Natives to work in their own communities seems to be the most logical solution to solving the state's long-standing problem of providing teachers for rural Alaska. Although the most likely distance education student in the state is a white female, Alaska Natives at UAF are over represented in the distance education student population in comparison to their representation statewide (Reyes & Bradley, 2000). This over representation of Alaska Native college students is much more likely to be found in the UAF rural campuses, which serve the smaller villages (UAF Office of Institutional Research, 1998).

Recruitment to UAF and to other colleges and universities has been affected by one undeniable fact: the poor quality of preparation of many rural secondary schools. One UAF study (Reyes, 2000) found that the most successful Alaska Native students had been uniformly told that they were not "college material" in the secondary schools they had attended in both rural and urban Alaska.

Many state residents, even some educators, seem complacent about the Alaska Native student population educational difficulties in K-12 public schools. This attitude seems to extend to Alaska Natives' under representation on college campuses, under representation across the faculty ranks, under representation in the professions, and under representation in Alaska classrooms, especially at the secondary levels.

Some long-time, non-Native residents justify these views by stating that the Alaska Native culture puts a high value on a subsistence lifestyle that largely rejects the cash economy. This view is often reinforced by a lack of a contemporary image of Alaska Natives in the research literature, popular literature, and the media. Alaska Native children rarely see their lives reflected in their public classrooms. Unfortunately, this rationale neglects to

address the many social problems —the high suicide rate of Alaska Native male youth, the drug and alcohol abuse, the neglect and abuse of children, etc. —that contributes to the moral and spiritual malaise of many Natives. (For further discussion that outlines some of these issues, see Napoleon, 1991; Kawagley, 1995; Foley, 1996.)

Even when Alaska Natives manage to obtain college degrees and a state teaching license, more likely in elementary education, they face additional barriers in obtaining positions as teachers in spite of the teacher shortage. It is a sad reality that some Alaska school boards in rural sites, even boards composed primarily of Alaska Natives, show a preference to hiring "outsiders" as teachers (Lipka, 1998). Some Alaska Native teachers seem to believe that they must teach "the western way" in order to show that they are qualified teachers. Lipka (1998), noted these comments of a Yup'ik teacher:

> "In the first few years, I mainly tried my best to teach like I had been taught so I would be accepted by all the other Western teachers. I feared teaching my own way because I would be labeled as an unqualified teacher, or a nonteacher. So I put away my culture for a few years. (p. 51).

The Decision

In spring of 2001, the School of Education faculty made the historic decision to include a web-based instructional component in all undergraduate education classes offered by distance education. Prior to this, the primary mode of delivery for distance education courses consisted of audio conferencing. Statewide, a Reyes and Bradley (2000) study found that over 90 percent of distance education course work were being delivered primarily by audio. The decision made by the faculty was an attempt to address the long-standing problem of access to those living in rural Alaska and to mediate the time-to-degree issue that too often prolonged a distance education student sometimes taking up to 15 years to obtain a college degree.

Unfortunately, many members of the rural faculty almost immediately began indicating resistance to learning to use the university's web based instructional system, **Blackboard**. Some of them even openly speculated that the decision to use web based instruction was one more way to further distance rural students from university faculty and the knowledge, support, and training they could provide. The reaction was so extreme that the Dean of the School of Education began to publicly speculate that 'this

experiment' probably would be discontinued after only one semester.

In order to prepare the instructors, rural faculty was flown to the main campus in Fairbanks in order for them to take advantage of the training provided by the technology support staff on campus. In addition, generous funding was provided for any faculty member in the School of Education to attend national conferences in which they could receive additional technology training. The new dean was also generous in providing state of the art equipment to the entire faculty especially to those involved in distance education.

In summer of 2001, the researcher began coordinating a technology grant called "Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to Use Technology," referred to as PT3, a multi-year, federal grant, the result of a collaborative effort between UAF and the University of Alaska Anchorage. The grant's goals were to provide technology training to preservice teachers and to university faculty at both institutions.

At UAF, a PT3 objective was to address the problem of access to training to UAF education faculty in the rural campuses, which included sites in Dillingham, Bethel, Nome, and Kotsubue.

The high travel expenses for these sessions were paid by the grant. Staff and students connected with each rural campus were also invited to participate in the workshops although the primary audience was the faculty.

In fall of 2001, the researcher began to put together a team to fly out to the rural campuses to provide technology training to faculty, students, and staff. The team sometimes varied, but generally consisted of the director of the Faculty Technology Training Center, faculty members from the main campus who had experience and were comfortable using a web based system, and graduate students comfortable with instructional technology. The training consisted of helping the faculty, staff and students in the rural campuses learn to use and to navigate the university's course management system and to encourage instructors to integrate technology into their course work.

The team consisted of racially diverse faculty and staff members, who had embraced and had integrated technology to their work. Workshops for the 2001-2002 academic year were scheduled for Bethel, Nome, Tok, Dillingham, and Kotsubue.

In reviewing data collected during the campus visits, the following general impressions can be made:

1. There appeared to be an under-utilization of well-equipped computer labs at some sites.
2. At each site, technical support staff was available.
3. There was evidence of faculty indifference to learning the web based system, a conclusion based on their under attendance at many of the workshops

Discussion

The School of Education decision to include a web-based component to courses offered was made as an attempt to mediate issues of access and equity to students in rural Alaska. Members of the UAF team, which had been put together for their expertise in instructional technology, had set aside their normal and extensive duties and responsibilities to travel to the sites to assist their colleagues.

Almost immediately following the School of Education decision, some members of the rural faculty began showing resistance to learning to utilize the university's web based instructional system expressing a preference to continue using audio-conferencing. The heightened nature and tone of the resistance suggested fear in using the system, fear of technology in general, and fear of change and uncertainty. These fears were in opposition to the expressed positive experiences in using the

system from some of their peers, abundant research that emphasized the positive outcomes of integrating technology into education, and the existence of national technology standards for teachers.

Stereotypes and Archetypes

Members of the team that visited the rural campuses consisted of racially diverse faculty and administrators who had volunteered to share their knowledge and use of technology in their professional lives. None neatly fit the commonly held perception of a technologically savvy individual who is commonly young, male, white, and casually dressed.

The faculty members who taught instructional technology courses in the School of Education and at the university were in fact mostly white males. Some of them showed disdain for the instructional system that the university had adopted preferring to design their own system. It is important to state that **Blackboard**, the system adopted by the university, was very user-friendly.

Usually, those comfortable with instructional technology seem to fit two archetypal models. One is the young 'dude' or 'techie' type whom commonly shows up to a meeting in crumbled

clothing, often unshaven, sometimes incoherent. He, it's almost always a 'he,' often seems to have problems with simple communication. However, these individuals bring highly valuable technical skills to the workplace, and they seem to actually understand the inner workings of a computer and/or computer systems, a mystery to everyone else. These 'techie' types seem to prefer it that way; at least that is the impression many times.

In the U. S., members of this population helped change the nature of the workplace in the last 20 years when their influence was greatest and as the communication revolution was taking hold. In response, the workplace has become more causal in dress and in communication style.

The second type of person comfortable with technology is often better dressed, has more formal credentials, and is curious to learn how to use technology to improve his or her professional lives. He or she does not normally need to know exactly how a computer works; they see technology as a tool. These individuals do not mind spending time to learn new technologies if it will help them do their work better and/or faster. Increasingly, most work places demand that all employees have these dispositions. Most

members of the UAF team visiting the campuses fit easily into this second category.

Access, Equity, Resistance

Commonly, residents of rural Alaska have historically been denied a quality education at both the secondary and post secondary levels. Web based instruction in distance education has the potential to change the barriers affecting this situation. It is unconscionable that some distance education students at UAF in the past have taken 10-15 years to complete a college degree. There is every indication that UAF administrators and policy makers are aware of this and have taken steps to upgrade its distance education equipment statewide and to encourage university faculty to become proficient in using instructional technologies in their classes.

Resistance by some members of the rural faculty consisted of direct complaints or statements that he or she 'just would not or could not' learn the system. Resistance also covered unrealistic demands for additional support. Complaints almost always included the fear that rural students did not have the right equipment to use the system or did not have access to the Internet.

[In fact, several studies have found Alaska to be the most "wired" state in the union; in addition, the experiences of other faculty did not bear this fear out.] This failure to 'buy into' using the new technology was supported by some members of the senior faculty who sometimes also expressed disdain for technology in general.

An additional element cannot be ignored. Resistance to technology seemed to fit the "Alaska spirit" and the independence of many state residents. Many residents take pride in their unique, sometimes quirky, demeanor, behavior, and dress. The state affords most individuals a great amount of personal freedom. Many people come to Alaska for this reason. These attitudes are much more pronounced for residents of rural Alaska.

School of Education and Accreditation

Like other schools of education in the country, the UAF School of Education faces accreditation mandates that include the full integration of technology standards. Education students and their professors must demonstrate competence in meeting these standards as outlined by the National Education Technology Standards for Teachers Project and the International Society for Technology in Education standards. With this additional

consideration, faculty members at the School of Education are slowly coming to believe that instructional technology must be in everyone's area of expertise and must not be relegated to one or two faculty members.

The Final Word

In a final analysis, the academic culture demands self-governance and respect for the individual. Tenured and tenure track faculty, experts in their own right, cannot be told how to teach and are protected by a variety of regulations, laws, and traditions regarding academic freedom. For these reasons, reluctant faculty, whether on campus or at the rural sites, must be accorded every possible support measure to assist them in getting over their fears and concerns so they can see that learning to utilize the new technologies will benefit them and their students.

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